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Special Summer Teaching Toolbox

Open Educational Resources: Getting the Most from Your Course Materials

by Liz Thompson

As an instructor emerging from emergency online teaching, you might be considering options for more flexible textbooks and other course materials. Even before remote classes, you might have wanted more from your textbooks and course materials. In the 2019 report [Inflection Point: Educational Resources in U.S. Higher Education](#), instructors reported skipping sections of the textbook, teaching topics in a different order, adopting supplemental course materials, replacing content with their own material, replacing content with material from other sources, correcting inaccuracies, and revising and editing material from the textbooks. You might already rely on the [Doctrine of Fair Use](#) to share copyrighted materials with your students, although fair use does not cover all educational use. As you know if you've ever put together a course packet, using a substantial amount of copyrighted work still requires the appropriate approval and licensing. One increasingly popular option for more flexibility is course materials known as Open Educational Resources (OER).

According to [UNESCO](#), "OER are teaching, learning and research materials in any medium—digital or otherwise—that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions." Do you want to tailor a textbook to your course goals and learning outcomes with fewer fair use concerns? Do you want to revise the textbook to include language and examples that better represent the students in your course? Do you want your students to have "day one" access to an e-textbook and the opportunity to purchase a print copy if that's what they prefer? Open Educational Resources (OER) provide a solution to these questions. Sparked by the growth of the Internet and online sharing, people often identify OER as e-books and other electronic materials, but many OER are also available in print. As early as 1998, David Wiley, pioneer for the use of open licenses in education, described the freedoms associated with open licenses. Today these freedoms are known as the [5 R's](#), which establish the rights to retain, reuse, revise, remix, and redistribute course materials. Specifically, [Creative Commons licenses](#) provide authors a simple way to retain their copyright AND explicitly give specific usage rights to the public.

With funding from non-profit organizations, governments, and institutions, instructors have been creating OER and building collections of OER for more than two decades. The Commonwealth of Virginia funds OER [course redesign grants](#) through the Virtual Library of Virginia (VIVA). Instructors who create VIVA-funded open course materials publish their final products on [VIVA Open](#) with a CC license, like [Introduction to Petrology](#) by JMU professors Liz Johnson and Juhong Christie Liu. Several publishers and collections have become important sources for finding open textbooks, primarily [OpenStax](#) and the [Open Textbook Library](#). For openly licensed course materials beyond textbooks (e.g., syllabi, assignments, and simulations), many instructors visit [OER Commons](#) and the [Open Course Library](#) to search for resources.

Adopting new textbooks and course materials, no matter the licensing, requires close evaluation for rigor. Because open textbooks can be electronic or print, including criteria for online materials when vetting open textbooks is crucial. The [Achieve.org](#) rubric and the [Affordable Learning Georgia Selection Criteria](#) provide sample tools for evaluating open textbooks. The criteria cover alignment with learning goals, quality of the content (including assessment and support materials), and accessibility of the material. The research exploring the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) using OER continues to grow; and in a recent study conducted at the University of Georgia, [Colvard, Watson, and Park](#) (2018) explored the effect of using OER on final course grades, focusing on D, F, and Withdrawal grade (DFW) rates. They found that, compared to those using traditional course materials, using OER improved final course grades overall and decreased DFW rates for underserved populations, potentially a result of having access to the course materials the first day of class.

Having course materials designated with explicit approval to remix and revise the content gives instructors flexibility to adapt the materials in ways not possible with “all rights reserved” copyrighted materials. Advocates promote how OER lowers barriers for student access to course materials, which can help level the playing field for underserved and underrepresented populations. However, most OER authors, editors, and publishers come from privileged populations that have the space and agency to write and publish OER. While the current catalog of OER titles comes from a predominantly white culture, you can find examples of instructors revising and remixing the content in these titles to be culturally responsive and to reflect and feature diverse voices and experiences. For instance, [BCCampus](#) publishes textbooks that reflect Indigenous populations.

Knowing about OER gives you more flexibility in choosing your course materials. The recently published *Best Practices in Designing Courses with Open Educational Resources* ([access through JMU Libraries](#)) is a practical guide for finding and teaching with OER. Also, JMU Libraries offers open textbook workshops (see [JMU Libraries list of Faculty Workshops](#) to register) and maintains an [OER guide](#), which links to collections of openly licensed textbooks, interactive simulations, homework platforms, case studies, and other course materials. When you are ready to begin revising a course and looking for new materials, JMU’s OER guide is a good place to start. OER provide the flexibility to customize course materials in normal times. In a time when classes might move online with little notice and when social justice issues are outpacing textbook publication, having more flexibility built into course materials can help alleviate the stress of teaching and learning during an unpredictable time in higher education.

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For more information about the CFI’s Teaching Toolboxes, please visit:
<https://www.jmu.edu/cfi/teaching/other/teaching-toolbox.shtml>